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THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

VOL. V, NO. 8 UNION COLLEGE : SCHENECTADY, N.Y. NOVEMBER, 1943

Worth Fighting For

I am convinced that English literature is on its way out as a subject in both schools and universities unless we not only reinforce our positions but see that they are worth fighting for. This past summer there was a newspaper account of the formation in New York City of a group to protect and maintain the teaching of the classics and modern languages and literatures in high schools as well as colleges. Mr. Neilson's article in "Harpers" (with much of which I disagree) and Mr. Rand's in the "Atlantic" show the concern of men now out of active work in the colleges, but capable of influencing opinion. All the humanities are at present under fire as much as the classics. Among the half-baked of course there is a feeling that we should nowadays confine our energies to mathematics ,physics, and chemistry, whether we have any aptitude for them or not. And there is another group which I consider more dangerous still: those who feel that American literature and American history alone should be taught,—as dangerous a viewpoint, in my opinion, as the Nazi doctrines it closely resembles. Isolationism and nationalism in literature and history as in politics can have dangerous consequences.

I admit that we have frittered away in the past many of our chances to secure respect for our subject. We forgot, or perhaps never knew ,that the teaching of modern languages and literatures has been on trial since its introduction in the 1870's, and we substituted books of the month for the great literature that had justified the experimental foundation of our departments. At Smith, for instance, too many Honors papers have been based on contemporary writers read often in translation, a thing which would have been impossible in my undergraduate days at Iowa. Our students often write wretchedly, especially if they are working in other fields than English, and anyone who takes a look at the prose of any undergraduate newspaper will find an appalling lack of common literacy. Except for professional gossip, I now know more about colleges and schools in the East than those west of the Alleghenies, but I do not know of any group, as distinct from unrelated individuals, which tries to write well, to criticize intelligently, and is willing to submit its work to frank public criticism. (Every school and college is likely to have a mutual admiration society calling itself a literary society, which meets to hear indifferent verse and fiction and extol them.) Yet when we students at Iowa published "The Midland," we were one group of many trying to apply professional standards of criticism to anything submitted to us, whether by undergraduates or by writers of established reputation. Not that there are not still a great many magazines! This past winter I was asked to write an article for a professional fraternity magazine, and copies of the periodical were sent to me. Some of the contributions were childish, three or four of a very high standard indeed, the majority mediocre. Most of the press—the greater part of the contributions were in verse—was puerile, one long essay being concerned with a solemn analysis of a tenth-rate and very derivative poetess. Yet most of the writers were teachers or aspiring teachers of English.

As a member of the C.E.E.B. English committee for some years, I have had painful evidence that our efforts in the past have often been either wasted or unfruitful, but though I am as ready as the next one to beat my breast and cry "Peccavi!" I think English literature, in spite of our professional sins, should survive in the schools and the universities. We have a year or two or three to do what we have left undone in the past before the Revolution strikes us. I honestly do not mind the threat to my livelihood so much as seeing destroyed a great source of culture, an important bridge between our present-future and the past. Good men fought in a like cause in the mid-nineteenth century, and partly lost. Yet as Mr. Rand reminds me three men once held a bridge.

—Anne B. G. Hart,
Smith College.

There will be no annual meeting of CEA during the holidays, but announcements of a deferred meeting will appear in the December News Letter.

Ulysses To His Men

There lies the port, my vessel is for sale;
There gloom the too-broad seas. My mariners,
Sons of those souls that toiled and died for me—
That once with an indecent frolic ate
The cattle of the sun-god, and opposed
Foolhardily Poseidon—I am old;
Old age hath meed of honor, but no toil.
Death closes all; but nothing ere the end,
Save stoic resignation, can be done;
'Tis unbecoming, men, to strive with gods.
The lights begin to twinkle in the shops;
Day wanes; that moon insidious climbs; the deep
Groans warning with sad voice; come, my good men,
'Tis not too late to improve our own old world.
Take rein, and sitting well in order smite
Your bounding burros; for my purpose holds
To contemplate the sunset, and take baths,
Warm baths, beneath the stars until I die.
Perhaps democracy will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Golden Mean,
And Aristotle see, whom we foreknew.
Though somewhat chastened, we abide; and though
We've lost, thank Zeus, the hybris which of old
Moved earth to heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal discipline of prudent hearts
Made poised by time and fate, with standards strong:
Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control.

—Ben W. Fuson, Mary Baldwin College.

The Liberal Arts

The fact that the Liberal Arts are at the moment down and out has shocked a good many of us who fancied, rather vaguely, perhaps, that we had in them something of importance. But quite obviously we had long before the present crisis failed to "sell" those same Liberal Arts to society at large which continued to think them quite unessential in a "practical" world.

We who upheld what we thought of as the Liberal Arts sinned in at least three ways: 1. We never really defined the term; 2. We never developed a coherent program for a Liberal education; and 3. We never established a line of defense against the insidious encroachment of scientific, practical, vocational or specialized education. We have certainly met a temporary defeat; but it must be turned to at least a partial victory—a possibility if we can learn from past mistakes.

To be brief I must be dogmatic.

1. A Liberal Arts education differs from a technical or specialized one in that it aims to develop the individual student as a complete person, not by merely filling him up with knowledge and technical skills. This involves, theoretically, concern with all human activities—art, science, philosophy.

2. The program should be made specifically for American youth as a preparation for intelligent citizenship in a free, democratic society. This involves a comprehensive understanding of our cultural past and present; a unified grasp of the ideas, movements and conflicts which have made us what we are as a nation. And through all should

(Continued on Page Three)

To Check or Not to Check

Loud has been the acclaim for the objective examination. The objective quizzer faces his world with confidence; his colleagues inflate his ego with approving nods; his students flatter him for being a "regular guy." In conversation his crisp "I give objective examinations" disposes of all contrary opinion with censure and finality. In his presence the non-objective quizzer can only mumble meek excuses, while, in turn, the students relegate him to the limbo of silent movies and model T Fords.

So far has this gone that a word from the so-called out-moded faction may not come amiss. Let the anathema fall; I am prepared for it. I believe that the objective examination as it is usually constructed for courses in literature (or for many other subjects for that matter) has at best little to commend it and that often it is positively harmful. On the other hand, I believe that the non-objective examination can be made a fair, interesting, and challenging test of those values which concern us most, and that at the same time it can be a wholesome, beneficial, and instructional experience.

No part of the objective examination is so poorly executed as the popular true-false device. Rarely in liberal subjects such as literature is it possible to phrase significant alternatives which are absolutely true or absolutely false. The values of literature depend upon fine shadings, implications, and approximations. Positiveness precludes all these. Unfortunately, a small modicum of truth on the false side will attract an apt student, and as he ponders upon it that bit of truth grows in importance. Is it a trick? He checks it "true." The question is thrown out, and the student is penalized, of all things, for thinking.

Students, however, overwhelmingly prefer objective tests. Checking items is a relatively simple task. Decisions are made quickly and rarely are the reasons for the decisions ever sought. Students trained for years in the art of checking are amazed that one might ask for reasons. Grades, too, are another cause for the preference. In spite of the various safeguards instituted to shackle the flagrant guesser, students are still perfectly willing to take their chances on checking a sufficient number of "rights." If, on the contrary, students are asked to write an essay, they know (perhaps from bitter experience) that their grades will suffer because of incompleteness, poor English, misspellings, and all the other causes for deductions which English instructors know so

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THE NEWS LETTER

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BURGES JOHNSON
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for the

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Editorial

Increase in CEA membership despite the demands of the armed forces and despite resignations due to hard times (for teachers), indicates that our young organization has come to stay. There are, therefore, several matters for our membership to consider. Some of these will be submitted formally by mail, and members are urged to reply promptly on receipt of such a ballot. Among less formal problems are the following, and the Secretary will welcome light upon them. Our esteemed contemporary, the National Council of Teachers of English, has launched a "Comparative Literature News Letter" circularized among college English teachers, occasionally referred to in its own circular as "The News Letter". Up to the moment the small resulting confusion has fortunately done neither paper any great harm, and has, in fact, brought us one subscriber, who has refused to allow her error to be corrected. But it emphasizes the fact that the title of our own compendium of pedagogical prescience is neither distinguished nor distinguishing. Surely, among our far-flung membership is one with exactly the right answer to the question: shall we change the name of our paper; and if so, to what?

Word comes that our steady and dependable Treasurer must give up his job in the near future, because of lack of time. The step is not so immediate as to create an emergency; Professor Richardson will stand by until his successor is found, but the finding is necessary. Among our afore mentioned f. f. membership there must be another with exactly the right answer; one who knows of an English teacher eager to serve his fraternity in this fashion, and endowed with that mysterious gift—an ability to keep financial affairs in order. He will be paid in gratitude, but he is at liberty to pay an assistant in something more tangible—by the hour.

The mystery is partially solved. The woodcut in our October issue, slightly reduced from the original and reproduced by photo-engraving, was sent out in its original form to readers of our esteemed contemporary "Pleasures of Publishing" issued by the Columbia University Press, but so long ago that the artist's name is lost. The title "Research" was added in this office. Our thanks to the "Pleasures of Publishing" are repeated, and we should be glad to carry on their good work by meeting any requests for reprints of our smaller reproduction.

We find autumn years pleasing in so many ways that their few disadvantages stand out sharply. One is that there is so little time left in which to take up in a serious way the studies of geology, philosophy, Aramaic, quantum mechanics, cookery and furniture making.

Our second great regret is that we cannot follow up some of the offers that come to us through the mail, promising to reveal secrets that normally require a lifetime to discover. This morning the postman brings us printed matter from the "Effective Thinking Foundation" of Hollywood, California. One of the circulars begins "Not once in a lifetime, but for the first time throughout the ages, the key to the mystery of the kingdom of power now has been pronounced and herein is offered to you free, as equal owner with the author, if you will but ask for it and pay the cost of delivery." There are ten pages to this particular circular, devoted largely to the word "Motivation," but including a good deal of instruction in the field of philosophy, theology and natural science. There must be something in it, because so much printed matter costs money and the existence of a foundation with so much money implies devoted disciples.

But we are going to resist the blandishments of this foundation for a time, because so many other claims precede it. For instance, we want to attend the Semantics Institute which promises us all sorts of things, and after that we want to go to the Palmer School of Photoplay Writing, also in Hollywood, which promises to make a motion-picture dramatist out of us in several painless lessons. Or doubtless it would be cheaper to join the outpatient department of one of our greatest New York universities and take a course in "action story writing" which will teach me "to begin writing for the pulps." I could embark upon it with greater assurance because the course immediately following it in the catalog announcement says "this course calls for serious work."

The Board of Education in New York City has approved for full credit two courses for teachers based on radio programs. "Recognition for these programs follows a six-month experimental period during which both courses were accredited as approved in-service courses for teachers, but without credit. Under this recent approval, teachers satisfactorily completing these courses will get full credit toward annual salary increments."

The two programs thus distinguished are "Lands of the Free" and "Music of the New World." The announcement was made by James Rowland Angell, one time president of Yale and now National Broadcasting Company public service counselor. O tempora, O Moses!

Gleaned From the Mail

Dear Editor:

Speaking of assonance and other technical terms: In theory practitioners of the art know the terms of the art best, and as far as painters are concerned I think the theory holds. But in some other lines I notice it is not so. Many printers do not know what "justify" means outside a courtroom, just as they do not know all the proofreader's marks one finds in a dictionary. And it amazes me to find that some of the most advanced numismatists have a very roundabout way of referring to a coin that by accident is struck when another coin has stuck in the dies, so that the piece has on one side a proper type, and on the other a reversed impression thereof, made from the stuck coin acting as a die. They call it "with reverse incuse" etc. but there is a proper name for it, BROCKAGE—which one of my friends who is perhaps the most skillful man on Roman coins now alive (British Museum) seems not to know. As I now edit the "Numismatic Review", this example comes to my mind.

For some reason, although I am by no means a writer who meets my own standards of excellence, I have a feeling that exact usage should be far more emphasized than it is in our day. The dumbest student always tells you a poem shows good choice of words; the fact is that often student, teacher and poet are of that opinion—and wrongly. Some very great writers are quite careless (quite "anglice" too) about the exact technical meanings of words. "Tragic" accidents (being hit by an automobile) are constantly referred to, though tragic, always has some moral implication, some share of the blame is the victim's, which in this town is not always true of the auto accident; unless it was tragic that the victim "didn't know the d - - d race," as the late Fred. the Great once cheerfully remarked, sometime before Mark Twain said something similar.

As for Poe, he was careful enough, but sometimes used a set of terms in his own way; and used the word caesura in a most exact and a most confusing, because unparalleled, fashion for a foot of one long syllable.

—Thomas O. Mabbott,
Hunter College.

Dear Editor:

In the flood of praise for Mr. Churchill's use of the English language it may be well not to shut our ears to possible infelicities. In the recent newsreel he said that a failure of the War Bond drive would "entail a prolongation of the war." Mr. A. P. Herbert would deplore such official language, which seems almost Carlylese. Surely this is not a model English style today!

Perhaps you may find me a carping member, but—

Cordially yours,

—Carrie Belle Parks,
State Teachers College,
Indiana, Pa.

Bibliography

This year a member of the College English Association, Dean Albert I. Spanton, retired from active service at the University of Akron. He had been active on this campus for fifty years as student, teacher and administrative officer. Since 1905 he had been Pierce Professor of English Literature and head of the department.

When it became known that Dean Spanton would retire in 1943, his friends set about creating in his honor the Albert I. Spanton Collection of English and American Literature. Hundreds of his friends contributed to the fund, and the Collection was formally presented to the University at the June convocation.

A bibliography of the Spanton Collection has been printed and distributed to all who had a share in the project. A good many copies of this leaflet remain on hand and since members of the Association may be interested in the publication, the University will mail a copy free of charge to anyone who requests it and sends a three-cent stamp to

—Harlan W. Hamilton,
University of Akron.

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The Liberal Arts

(Continued from Page 1)

be a recognition of moral values brought to bear upon our stumbling past, our imperfect present and our hopeful future.

3. Without any definite concept of what our educational aim is we have accepted strange courses and methods in our pseudo-Liberal Arts curricula; and we have lost unwittingly the purpose we ostensibly had in the drift towards specialization and the technical education of half-men and half-women. And in our loss of aim we have become departmentalized until our mass of courses on mere fragments of knowledge have ceased to make any coherent pattern and the poor students have become almost literally things of shreds and patches. We have forgotten the unity of the student in the unity of the concentration in a particular field of knowledge.

But now is the time to plan for a better future; and if the idea of a free, democratic America is to mean anything we shall need as never before leaders who see life steadily and see it whole. To train such is our first duty as teachers. We must, of course, also educate specialists; but they are only secondarily important. Our salvation as a nation lies in the hands of the Liberally educated. Learned specialists, without the Liberal mind and training, may even be dangerous citizens.

The pressures of our practical world have probably made purely Liberal Arts colleges impracticable for the future. My plea is only that students shall be obliged to have a Liberal basis for the later specialization which is inevitable. To this end, colleges need to set up at least a minimum of training which shall be directed towards the Liberal goal. When this has been assured, then, and then only, should narrow concentration be permitted. This required training would preferably be put in the freshman and sophomore years, although it might be arranged to run concurrently with Major work later on.

I would suggest that this basis of the Liberal Arts can be centered around an extensive and inclusive study of American culture—history, literature, philosophy, art—undepartmentalized and synthesized into a coherent whole. To that I would add a similar, if less intensive, study of the culture of some other country; for contrast and as a basis for objective criticism of the American scene; and, not less, as contributing to our needed international understanding. Since this is a predominantly scientific age, I would add a considerable study of science, its methods, its findings, its relationships—science in its broader meanings and manifestations. Naturally all students should be trained in written and oral expression as necessary to any effective citizenship. I would certainly require careful reading of the greater masterpieces of English literature as the supreme creation of the English speaking race and as the noblest record of Anglo-Saxon moral and social ideals. I would also like to see a serious study of the Bible as history and literature; as the source of much of the grander thought of our historic past.

If students have properly studied the program I have suggested; if they have been properly taught; if they have discovered who they are as Americans and what sort of world they are living in; if they have been awakened as to the plane on which they can live most satisfactory lives—then I am willing to let them loose to specialize as they will. We elders may regret many present tendencies. But cannot we build an integrating college education around a sound Liberal—an American-humanistic—core?

—Horace A. Eaton,
Syracuse University.

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—from an article by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr in "Christianity and Crisis" (a bi-weekly).

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14 September 1943.

Dear Editor:

I have been directed by the Secretary of War to acknowledge your letter of 26 August 1943, and to thank you for bringing to his attention the article quoted in your letter.

I judge that the article is one of two or three which Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr has written since his return to this country from a trip to England. You are quite right in believing that Dr. Niebuhr's statement that "our Army is almost completely devoid of any educational service" does not accurately represent the facts—with respect, for example, to the orientation course on the background and causes of the war, which has been required for all new inductees since before Pearl Harbor, the weekly discussions which company commanders have conducted with their men for a good many months, the circulation of weekly newsmaps and of other materials as a basis for discussion, the extensive program of individual and class instruction centering in the United States Armed Forces Institute, and the constant supply of reading material made available to the troops through the Army Library Service. The facts with respect to this program are being brought to Dr. Niebuhr's attention. In addition, it is planned to release in the near future an article fully descriptive of the War Department program for the information and education of troops in the United States Army, which should help to dispel some of the misconceptions which now seem to be prevalent with respect to the program.

Your interest in this matter is appreciated by the War Department.

Very sincerely yours,
—F. H. Osborn,
Brigadier General,
Director, Special Service Division.

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A Note on Rem

Mr. Wheeler's note on assonance brings up a rather vexatious critical and pedadogical difficulty—the lack of precise and commonly accepted terminology for discussing the various substitutes for rime in recent poetry. I propose to explore the problem briefly in the hope of starting a discussion which may lead to some agreement among ourselves. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that such an agreement might influence general usage.

Several preliminary statements need to be made: (1) In order to avoid ambiguity, circumlocution, and prejudice to terms already in the contest, I shall use (solely for purposes of this discussion) the noun "rem" to mean any similarity in sound short of rime. (2) The terms already in use are not only ambiguous but over-numerous. They include "false rime," "suspended rime," "imperfect rime," "off-rime," "near-rime," "half-rime," "slant-rime," "alliteration," "assonance," "consonance," "consonancy," "dissonance," "annomination," and "paraphone." (3) We need, at the minimum, terms comparable to "rime," v.t. and i., and "rime," n. If the participial forms of the verb are cumbersome, a separate adjective would be desirable. (4) It would also be useful to have terms for at least the primary subdivisions of vowel rem and consonant rem. I do not believe that we need separate terms for all the situations mentioned by Mr. Wheeler. We should avoid the creation of unnecessary jargon. (5) The main requisites are precision and wide acceptance. So far as possible, the meaning of the terms should be self-evident to an educated person who has not followed our discussion. Hence we should avoid, if possible, any flagrant violation of previous usage; but some departure from it will be necessary if we are to solve the problem at all. (6) Although, as Mr. Wheeler points out, authorities such as Mr. Untermeyer can not settle the question for us, their statements are valuable as evidence about past and present usage.

My interest in this matter was first aroused during my graduate study by the late Professor Sampson of Cornell. The simple terminology he employed offers a possible solution for our difficulty. In his usage almst any form of rem was called "assonance"; and he freely used the self-explanatory terms "vowel assonance" and "consonant assonance." His exposition was very clear, eevn to a person accustomed to thinking of assonance as limited to vowels. Under his influence I wrote an essay on Wilfred Owen's use of rem. Naturally I followed my professor's terminology. In addition to "assonance" and "assonant," I used the verb "assonate." (Don't shudder—one soon gets used to it; and besides, it has been with us, according to OED, since 1623.) By the use of these terms I was able to discuss Owen's complex technique in some detail without feeling restricted. In other words, this usage met the practical test. However, it has certain disadvantages. "Vowel assonance" and "consonant assonance" have the inevitable cumbersomeness of two-word terms; and there has been a rather strong current of usage restricting "assonance" to vowel rem. However, the wider meaning is not a mere novelty. A quotation dated 1727 in OED uses assonance precisely in Professor Sampson's sense. And Mr. Wheeler's quotations show that Mr. Untermeyer, who has read widely in modern criticism, is at times influenced by a similar trend of usage.

The best argument for Professor Sampson's terminology is that all the other terms in the list have serious disadvantages. All the compounds of "rime" (in addition to the disadvantage of being compounds) seem to have a derogatory connotation which prejudges the aesthetic question. "Consonance" and "consonant" have other meanings. "Dissonance" has both these disadvantages. "Annomination" is cumbersome and yields verb and adjective with reluctance. (Besides, a word which already has been used to mean both punning and alliteration should not be further burdened.) "Paraphone" is rather attractive but has little foothold in usage. Although it readily gives us "paraphonic" and "paraphonia" (if we may pilfer from the musicians), it does not suggest to my mind a suitable verb. Perhaps its sponsor (H. T. Walter) can provide one. "Alliteration" is now well established in a useful and limited meaning; any attempt to use it in a broader sense would probably cause confusion.

If the Sampson usage meets too much opposition, here is another suggestion: Take the least obnoxious of the combinations with 'rime' ("slant-rime" would be my choice) to mean rem in general. Use "assonance" for vowel rem and "consonance" for consonant rem.

Perhaps a separate term is needed for the situation which differs from rime only because the similar sounds do not include an "accented" vowel (battery-lottery). 'Half-rime' would at least make sense for this.

Does anybody have a better solution?

—J. B. Douds,
Albright College.

Note: In the December issue there will be contributions from Dorothy Thompson; Edith Mirrielees, Stanford; C. M. Wise, Louisiana State; Gilbert Macbeth, Villanova; and arguments pro and con as to whether there is any such thing as Army or Navy or Engineering English. Send in your opinion before November 25. Other contributions welcomed.

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To Check or Not to Check

(Continued from Page 1)

well. Naturally the instinct of self preservation will induce students to try to hide, if they may, their English, or lack of it, under a check mark.

Frankly, it seems to me that the non-objective examination supplies what the other sadly lacks. Certainly it promotes personality. A student must express himself. He can, too, be stimulated to make comparisons of his own, not simply to choose from a list which his teacher has labored to prepare for him. He can proceed to draw original conclusions and make personal applications. Half of what we teach in literature involves intangibles. A short written paragraph is a more intimate and accurate index of these intangibles than a whole sheet of checks.

Finally, not the least important reason for the written test is this. Where else could the humor-hungry instructor find such a delicious morsel as the following definition of a dilemma? A dilemma is a thing with horns, but is not a cow!

—D. S. Mead,
Penn. State College.

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